The Nature of God

CAN WE PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?

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THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

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Can We Prove the Existence of God?

● This sermon will, of necessity, be very incomplete. It is much more definitely a part of next week's discussion than I had originally anticipated. I trust you will endure this suspension until we have a chance next week to proceed with our discussion of the Nature of God. That, of course, is the most important sermon in this series, but it would be impossible to begin with the most important. I have put it in the middle so that we could lead up to it with sufficient foundation for our thinking to establish the point that I want to establish, and then go on from there with a discussion of some of the consequences for thinking and religion that would flow from such a notion.

It is a very easy thing to find a reason for not doing something you do not want to do. It is just as easy to find a reason to justify an idea or a position that you want to hold. Either approach is a rationalization, meaning that it is unsound. It is the adoption of an argument or a reason to justify an end that you have already decided upon; and you reach that end by means of that one reason to the exclusion of any other reasons to the contrary or even in support. Scientists are well aware of this great danger and difficulty. When they get an idea of thesis and are bent on proving it applicable or true, they are very much inclined to slip over arguments and facts to the contrary. They are very apt to ignore little pieces of reality or fact that do not exactly fit in with the plan that they have in mind.

Now it is unconscious, of course, with any good scientist, but, nevertheless, it is a great danger even for the best. A good scientist is recognized by his absolute adherence to the facts and to his reliance on what they say, and the direction in which they will lead him, for he has perfect confidence that the truth is far better than any rose-colored fanciful picture of reality however beautiful the latter may be. We in religion should have no less pride, faith and confidence in the Goodness of Life as to be unafraid to pursue our investigation of that Goodness, come what may! We should have enough faith in our own powers of investigation and in the Nature of God not to be the slightest bit afraid of the loss of any idea however precious it may seem to us.

How do we go about proving the existence of God? Do we assemble facts and proceed in the same fashion to prove God that we do other reality? I should think that would be a common standard upon which to begin. I want you to note that we have said "prove the existence of God". This does not mean merely proving that you have an idea of Him, nor that you have faith in Him, not that you want to believe, nor that millions upon millions of people have believed in God; but that we shall attempt to prove the actual existence of the God in Whom these millions have believed and in Whom you believe: Existence in the same degree as the chair in which you are sitting; existence to the same extent that you, as an individual, have existence. That means that we must begin to marshall evidence not merely ideas. We must bring facts to bear on the problem. We must be able to point out what it is we are going to prove; and then we must be able to go out and find, actually find that reality there waiting where we said it would be. Now we are in the realm of science. To proceed in this manner is to proceed scientifically.

● There are a number of ways in which men have attempted to prove God's existence. Let us examine these briefly to see what validity they have. One of the most popular methods traditionally and currently is assertion on the basis of faith. "I have faith that God exists. I have faith that all these saints and theologians and philosophers and common people who have believed in Him cannot have been wrong. I have perfect faith in God". So faith is used without evidence. It is used as an extension of evidence. It is used as a higher authority. We have been discussing this in connection with the supernaturalist. Faith is taken to be a way in itself of establishing the existence of that in which you have faith.

A second way is by means of pure reason. You accumulate ideas and you show that one idea develops from another until you come to the idea that there must be a God or that there is a God — all the time you are entirely in the realm of ideas without reference to facts — and you thereby "prove" God's existence.

For the most part, religious people have combined these two approaches. They have combined their faith with intellectual reasoning. And as we had occasion to say earlier in this series, all religious groups are perfectly delighted to make use of reason if, as and when it suits their purposes and desires. But when their reasoning begins to conflict with their faith, they drop reason as subsidiary and inferior, and project themselves forward

on the basis of their faith alone. Now the use of these two methods in combination, neither one of which is sufficient or good enough in itself, does not make the combination a good one. Since each is inadequate in itself neither is sufficient check on the other.

There is a fourth way, and that is the procedure by way of scientific method. This is procedure by reference to actuality. Of course it must involve the use of reason, and, of course, it must involve some element of faith. Faith comes in after you have made your discovery. For then you have got to build your life on that discovery, and I think you will find it taxing enough to keep you busy for the rest of your natural life.

Scientific reasoning says: Do you want to prove something? All right, state what it is you want to prove. Then state the conditions under which you will consider that proposition to have been proved. Then proceed to find those conditions which will prove that proposition. Find the conditions regardless of your reasoning, regardless of your faith, regardless of what you want and your desires and your tradition. Actually bring your hand or eyes or body in contact with those facts, with that reality; and then, having accepted your proposition to begin with, and having accepted the test which you will have established for it, we shall know that that reality is there, providing other men may also make that discovery, and provided I, too, may bring myself into contact with that reality. Now that is the intellectual analysis. Let us make it concrete.

Someone says: "I am convinced that this bowl of water is salt water."

And you say, "Why?"

He answers: "Well, it looks like salt water. I have been told that fish swim in salt water, and there are fish here. It has the quality of salt water. I have a feeling that it is salt water. I need to believe that I am right in my conviction. I have seen salt water, and this has the same effect on me. I am sure that it is."

● Then someone says, "That is hardly enough. Your faith, your ideas, perhaps your need and your desires, your feelings, these may all be wrong. Why do we not find some way of actually proving or disproving your claim?"

On the basis of this challenge a method is readily available. If it is salt water and we boil it there will be a residue. That residue will be salt, because the water will evaporate and salt will be left. So the parties in the dispute accept that evidence

of proof, and proceed to conduct the experiment. Of course if a residue is obtained, it will have to be subjected to further test to see whether or not it really is salt. At any rate, regardless of results, it is apparent that this method will give us actual proof. There is the laying down of demands and tests that will prove by actual dealing with reality that this particular form of existence is what you say it is.

● You would do the same thing with a friend, to put it on a higher plane. You are sure that someone is your friend! How are you sure? You live together. You have played together. You have worked together. You are sure that he loves you. You are very fond of him, and it is pleasant to do things together. So you could go on accumulating similar reasons. Then someone would say, "Well, now, just what is it that you mean by a friend? Define your term." You would probably define a friend, not simply as a person with whom you do things, but as one with whom you have a strong bond of sympathy and understanding. In the face of such a challenge you would offer not only definition, but some sort of positive test such as: "When I am in trouble, this person I call a friend will help me. He will help me at the cost of his own welfare. He will not merely use me for his own advancement. Our relationship is one of mutuality.

Then someone would say, "Well, would you prove that? Would you test it? Have you ever tested it?" Then if by reference to actual situations that person could meet the test established, you would have established your original point. But no amount of feeling and desire, hope and aspiration would prove that he was a friend until some such test had been made. Of course in the area of human relations one does not act in such a coldly scientific manner. Nevertheless our selection of friends, if we are wise, is based on such an approach, conscious or unconscious.

How do we go about proving the existence of God? We must do it the same way. We must state exactly what we think God to be. Then we are required to state the terms or conditions under which that existence will be considered as established. We will have to say just where this reality called God may be found so that if you undergo the conditions laid down, you will find at the end of the test a reality called "God," a reality as real as this person you call a friend, or as this salt, or as the language you speak. It should be remembered that God like any other object should be capable of being tested, proven or

discovered by any person willing to subject himself to the tests imposed as necessary for proof.

Now I should like to spend the rest of this discussion on a consideration of the methods or arguments most commonly used to prove the existence of God. For the most part, we shall confine ourselves to a consideration of them on a purely logical basis. You will judge for yourself how closely they approximate the conditions laid down above. The first argument known as the cosmological, runs as follows. We are in a building here. We know it has taken wood, stone, mortar, glass, iron, steel, and copper to build it. We do not find such objects and such materials in this kind of form anywhere in the world without someone having put them into that particular form. We know when we see a building that some person must have thought of the building, and other people must have built it. There seems to be a cause or causes for everything that exists. There is a cause of our existence. There is a cause for the chair, and when you go beyond the chair to the individual who sits in it, you find a cause in the physical need of that individual. You can go back beyond the need to biological organism and to the world in which that biological organism sprang up, and so on. In other words, you can start anywhere in the universe, and you will find something that goes before, and you can go back beyond that and beyond that. So if we start with a chair and go back and back and back, we finally come to the world itself. At that point it is claimed that since all these things in the world have had a cause, therefore there must be a cause for the world itself. You do not find buildings just existing naturally without someone having made them so, we reason, you do not find a world without someone having created it. You have causes for everything else, and therefore there must be a first cause which caused the world in which all these other things have taken place.

● That is one of two or three of the most popular arguments. I am going to suggest just one or two criticisms of it or factors to be considered. First of all, you must realize that while we find everything, most everything if not everything, has a cause, there is absolutely no logical necessity that everything must have a cause. If you were to put it in the form of that last statement, you would be saying that chance is self-contradictory or impossible; and we have had enough experience, it would seem, and can assemble enough evidence to indicate, if not prove, that chance is not impossible; that many things happen by chance; that there is no absolute determinism. We must

grant that fact, I think, and therefore there is a strong possibility that this world did not have any first cause; that it occurred simply and purely by chance.

Now, you may not want to believe that, but it seems that you must at least accept the logical necessity of that possibility. Remember, as you consider this point, that the entire argument in its favor was on exactly the same level of pure reasoning.

● There is a second, more serious argument in criticism of this point of view. You say everything has a cause, but when you go back to the world and its cause you stop. You say the world itself must have a cause, and you name the cause of the world, the First Cause. Why do we stop with the First Cause? What right have we to assume that the first cause does not also need a previous cause? We have autocratically established an end to the progression with no obvious evidence and no proof at all that there must be that end. Logically, the argument is one of infinite progression. You cannot stop at any one place without being autocratic, and without laying yourself open to the criticism that you stopped with the cause you wanted to stop with; and if you stop with the so called First Cause instead of going beyond that, you could, with equal authority, stop with the world itself, without inquiring as to how it came about. Would not the latter solution be much simpler and equally sound and logical?

Oh, I know that you will say, "Well, it is supernatural, and the supernatural cannot be questioned." But if the supernatural cannot be questioned, on what basis do we assert the supernatural? If we assert it on the basis of evidence, then that same evidence is open to criticism. If we say that the supernatural is something that just exists, but what it is, we do not know, then we have no right to say that the supernatural that created the world is, in itself, the end because then we have ventured into making a statement about the actual nature and existence of that supernatural which by our own definition is unknowable.

Another argument is that called the teleological. This is as familiar as the first, and comes from the Greek word meaning end or purpose. It is an argument based on the apparent order and purpose in the universe. Just as the cosmological argument says, given a world you must have a first cause, so the teleological argument says, given this kind of a world, there must be a supreme intelligence, or mind, or God that ordered it. Let us start from our building again. You can see that it did not just

happen. You know that it took a man's mind and vision to see, in the first place, this building; and it took another man's technical skill to outline it and plan it; and it took the work of a great many other skilled men to put it up. So you look at our world, and you see there is an order there; that it is not chaotic; that things fit into each other; and that everything seems to have its function and its purpose, and that function and purpose fits in with the function and purpose of other things. It is a universe. It is one-world with everything growing in greater and greater wholes. So, you ask if it isn't logical to assume that there must have been a divine mind that planned that? Isn't it rational to say that it could not happen by chance; and since it is such beautiful order, it must have come from a mind? It is a strong and popular argument, and I will leave you with these criticisms for your consideration.

First of all, you should realize that the order of the world is the order that happens to be here, and there is no reason to assert that any other order would be disorder. This is a mild statement of the idea that even chance would be considered order. If we were to live in a world that was run or ruled or governed purely by chance, then that would be the order of the world in which we lived. Just because there happens to be a particular kind of order here is no argument against another kind of order. Ultimately then this teleological argument reduces itself into the cosmological argument which we have already treated.

Besides this fact that there may be many different kinds of order, you ought to recognize that given the order that happens to be in this world, we may be simply the type of species that happened to result from such order. Thus while one might be led by such perfect adaptation of species to environment to say, "Divine Mind" planned it all, it is equally in order to say that such an argument is after the fact and largely emotional. Any species produced by any type of order will necessarily be adapted to that order. This is a necessity of existence not an argument in support of a "Supreme Intelligence" responsible for it all.

● This order and this function and purpose of every object and every item must also be tempered by the realization that there is a great deal of disorder in the world; and there is a great deal of waste and loss; that the world is not as economical and perfectly ordered as the average person thinks it to be. The amount of disaster, as anyone who has studied anthropology

and biology knows, is simply tremendous. You must also realize that every object which appears to have a single function, has such only in that particular environment. If you change the environment, that object will have a different function; and whereas, in the first place, you say it was created just for that reason, if you take it over into another environment, you find that it conforms equally well to this other order and to this other function. We must not make the mistake of assuming that because things happen to be, as they appear to be at one time, that they were created for that end and for no other end, and that they could serve no other purpose.

● I am not going to be able to spend as long on each of these arguments as I should, but I am outlining the major argument for and the major argument against, and it is for you to work them out for yourself.

There is a third argument called the Ontalogical. I can see less reason in this one than in any of the others. It runs this way: I have the notion of a supreme, perfect being, and since I have that idea, then such a being must exist. I have used the term "supreme, perfect being." If it is not a being, then it does not conform to my definition. If it is not supreme, it does not conform. If it is not perfect, it does not conform. Therefore, there must be some supreme, perfect being. No amount of evidence can refute my claim because if you do not accept my definition, you are not speaking to the point and if you do accept the definition, there is always the possibility of discovering such a being. No quantity of evidence to the contrary can possibly outlaw the possibility.

That is more or less akin to a statement of this sort: I have an idea of a creature that has the head of a lion and the body of a man. Therefore, such a being must exist. Merely because you lay down the definition, "a supreme perfect being," does not mean to say that such a person exists in actuality.

Now there is a fourth argument, and this is also very strong. It is the argument from morality and from ideals. Material objects are explained by reference to the natural world in which they have their origin. But where do you go for the explanation of a man's morality and idealism? Where do you go for that? Surely not to the same world that you go for the explanation of objects, because ideals and morals and spiritual thoughts are quite distinct from objects of material substance. This argument came from the great philosopher Kant. It holds that there must be a spiritual realm corresponding to our ideals and

morality. There must be an author or an originator of a source of these things, and that Source is God. The argument goes on to say in popular form that if there be no God, one cannot any longer adhere to any moral system or any ideals. There is no longer any justification for it! That is the form in which the proposition is most commonly found.

I must say that I know no more inadequate reason for morality than that! Surely we do not have to have any supernatural validation of the things which we know to be good and true and right and beautiful! They are that in themselves. We do not need any spiritual, supernatural authority for their Goodness! We can prove them to be good here and now, and he who is religious or good only because he has had a supernatural revelation is not, in my estimation at least, on a high moral level.

I want to go into another very touchy field, and I am going into it because it is a very important one. It is this: In our discussion groups, we have been talking about an after-life, the last several weeks; and I have been making the statement that if a person's belief in an after-life makes no difference to his life here and now, but does help it, even though there be no proof of such a life, then he is perfectly entitled to hold his idea. But when a person's belief in an after-life begins to affect the quality and character of his life here, then it is time to eliminate the notion for it has become an evil. Any person who is good and true and moral here only because he has an idea of another life is not a truly good and moral person! It is just like saying that if no one finds out about it, you are perfectly free to do what you want to, however much it may hurt another person. It is working on a reward basis. It is working on a candy for goodness idea. It is working on the idea that the life you live here does not mean anything, and that the only thing that counts is another life. And when you get into that attitude, then your life here begins to disintegrate for you have no concern with this world and its problems. Too long has our religion been concerned with pie in the sky. No wonder critics have described it as an opiate. But if you start out with what you have got and what you know to be good and true, the other life will look after itself! It will follow as the day the night.

● "I am come that ye might have life and have it more abundantly." Here and now!

When we begin to say that if there is no supernatural God and after-life, we will not be true and good, we are unworthy

people, because it ought to be clear to us that moralities are the rules of good conduct! It ought to be clear to us that what we have called good is something that has been wrought out in the forge of life, and it has been brought to us as wisdom at great expense to countless thousands of people! This is the wisdom of the ages! It is the way men have discovered they have to live! They have to be this way in order to live here, in order to live with any degree of decency or goodness at all. These are the rules regardless of another world; regardless of any God. This is the way in which men must live! It stands on its own. It needs no supernatural validation.

● Now I have not said that morality and rules of conduct do not have a validation beyond the mere rule and beyond the mere fact — not so mere at that — that it holds Society together and makes for rich and fruitful living, but I am saying that the existence of ideals and morality is not, in itself, a proof of such a God as man have been accustomed to think of.

There are three or four others, arguments frequently used, and I will be brief with these. I shall just mention them. First of all there is the argument from mystical experience. Now I haven't met many mystics. I ought to say that I cannot, at the moment, recall having met any, but I know they are abroad. I have read their writings. A mystic is a person who, because of a peculiar, emotional physical set-up is able to sense things. He has — now I am in trouble in trying to describe what a mystic is. I shouldn't have started on it. A mystic claims to see things that others do not. Truth comes to him in experiences akin to a trance. It does not come by logical procedure. It does not come by studying facts and evolving truths out of them. It does not come by painful effort. It comes in a burst. The mystic sees deeper and further and more intensely than other people. Now I have been hesitating all the way through because it would appear from my statement of it that a mystic was one who was automatically right. This is the common description of such an experience. It is thought to bring absolute unquestioned knowledge. Of course you know that I would deny this claim in very hearty fashion. Nevertheless, it is still true that many men of this type come back from their "transports" declaring that they have seen God and that their experience proves irrefutably that God exists.

We must also know — and this is the way you proceed by common-sense criticism — that all mystics do not feel that way. Not all mystics, by any means, have come back with the same

notion or same conviction of God. In fact, there is a small percentage of them that does. We must also remember that the mystical experience of an individual is dependent upon that individual's background. It is dependent upon his tradition. It is dependent upon his desires and his hopes and his aspirations and his training. It is dependent upon his theological convictions. So whatever he feels, he *interprets* in terms of this background. Remember in religion, it is usually an interpretation that is under discussion. It is your interpretation that is important insofar as you cannot speak of anything without interpreting. Hence your account and description may be erroneous. When it comes through you, from you, it is your interpretation. And when I dispute your interpretation, I am not disputing the legitimacy of some reality as the basis of your experience and your claims.

Now there is another way, and this is the way of miracles. Men say that since Jesus performed miracles, therefore Jesus must be Divine. Men say that because of the miracles that are now performed, there must be a God in order to account for these miracles. There are two things to watch in this approach. Firstly, all miracles are under suspicion. All miracles are open to evidence and to criticism; and one does not accept the mere declaration of a miracle without subjecting it to tests if he is interested in building upon such miracles. Secondly, we ought to realize that all that we do not understand is a miracle before we understand it, and that if men had, in the past, stopped with the notion of miracles, we would have made no progression in our knowledge and understanding of this world. It is only as men dig and seek and quest further for the meaning, cause, and explanation of things that they enlarge the boundaries of their knowledge. As a result of such rigorous effort and applied intelligence, we are instantly bringing into the light of knowledge that which at one time lay outside and was considered miraculous — that is something transcending the natural laws of this world. The miraculous is more and more discovered to be something that only transcends our knowledge at some particular time in this world's history, and is not above or beyond the natural laws or our ability to understand.

● There is a further argument based on strength of feeling. This is a common lay argument. You have a feeling that God *must* exist and that feeling is deep in you. It is akin to the mystic's spirit. It is something that you know without possibility of denial or need of proof. You meet dozens of other people

who have known that there was a God; and you read history and the philosophers of other religions, and you find that they, too, had a feeling that there was a God. So you are sure that there is one.

● In this connection it should be said that all such feelings are good data for investigation. Such feelings ought to be pursued; we ought to find out what is at the base of them and how they originated, and why they are good or valid, if they are. They are an instigation for experimentation, but no feeling is ever, in itself, a proof that what we feel or think is actually true no matter how strong it may be and how devoted you may be to it, or how important it may be to you.

The final point of argument that I shall bring or suggest is that of instinct. People say that knowledge of God is instinctual; that all men have it; and that this feeling that we have just finished talking about is more than feeling; that it stems from instinct; that as far back as you want to go you find men talking about gods and deities. Belief in God is a product of instinct and as such must be accepted as true.

The same criticism must be raised against this that was brought against some of the earlier arguments. Not all men have this feeling, and the instincts are in no sense a sure guide to true thought. An instinct must be universal to be an instinct, and the instinct, or the knowledge of God is not by any means universal. Then there is the further fact that if God's existence were revealed to us in our instincts, it would come to us much earlier and much harder, and be impressed upon us much more deeply and thoroughly than it is. Do not believe for a minute that little children all believe in God. Their atheism starts at a very early age.

I have presented some seven or eight arguments for God, and I suggested some criticisms of them. You will relate these arguments and these criticisms to my original suggestions that there were a number of ways to proceed to prove a claim. One of them is by faith, another by pure reason, another way is by combining reason and faith, and the fourth way is the scientific method whereby you establish the definition of what you want to prove, and then you state the conditions which you must find in order to prove that, and then you show that such conditions actually may be found. It will become apparent that in no case has any one of these arguments that I have presented, been based on the scientific method. They have all proceeded on the basis of reason and faith or a combination of the two, and

as such, they are merely indications of the desires, and perhaps the need of people, but are not, in any way, a proof for the actual existence of the God they seek to establish. They are at best a reason for further search but in no case a proof, if proof consists of actually establishing and finding the reality of which you have spoken!

I am going on next week to deal with my conception of the Nature of God, and I shall attempt to establish that conception, and to show how God's existence may be actually proven by you.

We shall terminate our discussion this morning by suggesting that when that which you want to prove lies beyond experience it cannot be proven. When that which you want to believe in or which you do believe in lies beyond experience, it cannot be proven. Of course, at the same time it cannot be disproven. Thus, if God be something supernatural and above and beyond this world, if He be not something actually existing in the world, then you can neither establish His reality nor disprove His existence. There is no evidence, you see, to either prove or disprove. So, if you want a God and you want a Heaven in spite of everything, then you should cast that heaven and that God's reality in a realm outside this one. In this way no one may successfully attack your concept or disillusion you concerning your God, but at the same time, I rather suspect He will be very little help and aid to you here and now. There is no need that God should be outside nature in order to be worthwhile. There is no need that God be something apart from this world. There is in fact, every need that He should be a part of it. Our lives are cast here in this vale, and it is now and has been and may be a vale of great suffering and tears. What we need, if you come down to a question of need, is some reality that is down here working in and through all this thing with us; some source of strength that we know and can find and can work on. It is hard enough to have faith in God when you know Him and when you have found Him without using your faith to merely *believe* in a transcendental realm and deity.

● Let us find God here and now, and I will guarantee when you do, you will have enough to keep you busy in your living by having faith in Him. It is this God we must find, and it is this faith we must develop if this race to which we belong has any hope or is to have any future.